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Talking Back: A Trustee Reflects

Winston Churchill

Responses to the Fall issue on governance

TALKING BACK

A Trustee Reflects

What students most need from expensive education is spiritual formation.

By Winston Churchill

In the most recent issue of *Conversations*, which focused on how to govern our institutions of higher learning, one of the themes that dominated its pages was the question of shared governance: How has it succeeded? How has it failed? Is it still a useful construct, or should we seek, as Richard Ingram and Robert Moore Jr. suggested, to abandon the term in favor of an alternative?

When considering shared governance in today's climate, the discussion usually emphasizes the role of the faculty senate, and its relationship to the president and other higher-level administrative officers. This is of course understandable, but it can lead to the unfortunate implication that participation in shared governance does not extend to university trustees. I think it's time for trustees to actively reinsert themselves into this dialogue. As several of the authors in the last issue of *Conversations* argued, shared governance is ultimately about open communication. I would take this one step further: shared governance is not just about the communication of different concerns and perspectives, but about different constituencies figuring out how to teach each other and learn together.

I see this is as a step beyond the more prosaic open-communication model, and one that seeks to foster not only awareness, but depth of understanding and insight into the different and sometimes conflicting perspectives of the faculty, administrative officers and trustees. Many of the complaints about shared governance focus on the fact that it can be a cumbersome and slow process. Finding consensus is hard work, and in the short-term it is not always the most efficient route. However, I always try to advocate in favor of taking a longer view, and I have found that working towards real agreement among the different constituencies not only leads to better decision making, but also to better implementation.

The question of shared governance and open communication has become particularly important for our institutions in recent years. One of the questions that I often ask the boards on which I serve is: What does it mean for an institution to have a Catholic identity in an increasingly pluralistic society? This issue has become more urgent due to the less tolerant and more xenophobic winds that have been blowing in our country. In the post 9/11 world, much of American society has responded

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to a fundamentalist threat from abroad by adopting a more fundamentalist culture at home.

In the first months of 2005, cultural and moral issues have been at the political foreground, from Terri Schiavo and stem cell research to evolution and the concept of a just war. These are dividing lines across which many on both sides believe compromise is neither attainable nor desirable. These issues have and will continue to create unrest among our students, our teachers and ourselves.

For Catholic universities and colleges that have worked so hard to integrate a specific religious identity with the tenets of cultural pluralism and academic freedom, these increased tensions are doubly complicated. We try, usually successfully, to offer a liberal education in a faith-based institution. The legacy and mission of our universities has been deeply steeped in the traditional values on both sides of these debates, and consequently, both sides will make strong claims that theirs represents the "true" identity of what a Catholic institution is or should be. While many continue to worry about the threats of ever-increasing secularization, others believe the greatest danger is from the other extreme.

Such ideological conflicts are often seen as exposing the soft underbelly of shared governance, as different groups clash while attempting to assert their respective agendas and the result is a stalled process. It is true that shared governance does not offer a magical solution to such problems. However, I think that clarity and transparency of roles and relationships between various constituencies can go a long way in preventing a climate of sharp disagreement from transforming into a crisis. The primary benefit of a clearly defined and widely disseminated decision-making process is that it helps to manage expectations, and enhances the perception of fairness in outcomes.

Another issue that often inserts itself in the discussion of shared governance is the threat of competition, or what I have previously called "managed education." Like the current phenomenon of managed healthcare, managed education comes in the form of new and agile competitors that are more adaptable to the immediate needs of our students. This new type of educational competition, in the form of professionally-oriented schools, distance learning programs, and an increased competition from universities outside the U.S. provides a unique challenge to Catholic Universities. Integral to how we view our mission—and how we challenge our students—is that we seek not only to educate them, but to help them grow spiritually. In a world in which educational decision-making has already started to move away from time-honored institutions and brand names to post-graduate employment salary statistics, this part of our mission is simultaneously becoming more crucial and more difficult to market. It is not an easy task to convince students that what they most need from an expensive education is spiritual formation; to take the time to reflect and question who they are and how they see the world.

To me, this is an example of how the different constituencies involved in shared governance can learn most from each other. We trustees charged with fiduciary responsibility for our institutions can often fall prey to overemphasizing issues of market forces and expanding revenue without always having a full appreciation of how our attempts to enhance competitive advantage directly affect our students. As such, we have much to learn from faculty representatives about how new developments, such as distance learning technologies, affect student life. Our faculty members provide a strong link to helping us understand the student perspective on such innovations, which is always an essential viewpoint to consider in our occasionally cloistered decision-making process.

Ultimately, shared governance is a framework for addressing the challenges of governance in a world of globalization that, to me, represents the greatest revolution in human society in all of human history. Almost all of the commentators in the last issue concluded with an emphasis on mutual trust, collegiality and cooperation, and that's the point on which I'd like to end as well. Keeping the important human virtues alive in a revolution of such huge and secular proportions is going to require everybody's best thinking. ■